

Personification-Metaphors

Author(s): Morton W. Bloomfield

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PERSONIFICATION·METAPHORS

by Morton W. Bloomfield

One of the important cultural features of the last fifty years in the West has been the revival of interest in allegory in the various senses of that semantically overloaded word. Although the early Romantics were much interested in the subject, it lost, in the face of the successes of science, the historical method, and the triumph of literary realism in the nineteenth century, much of its glamor as that age moved on. It had not been, of course, forgotten, for the basis of Christianity partially rests upon at least one sense of that word, but the notion of historicity and the "true facts" tended to drive allegory somewhat under cover. John Ruskin, Dean Farrar, Preserved Smith, to take only a few Anglo-Saxon names, did, it is true, write valuable comments on allegory and allegorical levels in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Various German and French scholars also dealt with the subject from various angles, but often both they and their Anglo-Saxon colleagues displayed their distaste for the method. Biblical scholarship was positivistically and historically oriented. Literary study was primarily philological.

Beginning after the first World War, scholarship slowly began again to look at allegory in the various senses of the word and in some depth. In Anglo-Saxon countries, the major figure was probably C. S. Lewis, whose *Allegory of Love* in 1936 reopened in a basic way the whole concept as it applied to the Middle Ages and Renaissance. After the second World War, the notion continued to receive much attention, and among the most significant articles was our honorand's "The Art of Reading Medieval Personification-Allegory," which appeared in *ELH*, 20 (1953), 237-50. When asked to write for this issue of *The Chaucer Review*, I thought that some of my recent thinking on the subject of personification, especially because I have been indebted to this article, might form an appropriate subject to pay honor to a scholar and friend from whom I have always learned and whom I have always admired.

Let us begin by looking at Enobarbus' famous speech in praise of Cleopatra (Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.190-218):

ENOBARBUS

I will tell you.

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,

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Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were *lovesick* with them; the oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they *beat to follow faster*,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggared all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,
 O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-colored fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did.

AGRIPPA

O, rare for Antony.

ENOBARBUS

Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
 So many mermaids, tended her i'th'eyes,
 And made their bends adornings. At the helm
 A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,
 That yarely frame the office. From the barge
 A strange invisible perfume *hits the sense*
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city *cast*
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
 Enthroned i' th' market place, did sit alone,
 Whistling to th' air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
 And made a gap in nature.

AGRIPPA

Rare Egyptian!

[Italics added]

Here we find a number of personifying metaphors which are revealed by the verbs. As I myself have pointed out,¹ in spite of first appearances, the verb not the noun is crucial to personification because it frequently enables us to determine whether the noun, which appears to be a personification, is to be regarded as animate or not and because it usually provides the "non-metaphoric subject with a metaphoric predicate".² Occasionally an adjective, another noun, and, even more rarely, a pronoun may carry the metaphoric load, so to speak. It is the verb, however, that usually performs that function, except in personification dialogue.

If some of the verbs and, in some cases, the predicates in Enobarbus'

speech are looked at, it becomes obvious that one of their main functions is to change metaphorically their inanimate subjects into animate subjects. Normally, personifications are thought of as applying to abstract nouns. This figure is usually indicated by capitalization (which is also sometimes demanded by its position in the sentence as first word). The noun is also usually in the singular number inasmuch as words like truth, love, infidelity, faith, and so forth, when used as mass-words (i.e., words which do not normally appear in the plural), are commonly capable of simple personification.⁸ Thus, words like "winds," "oars," "tackle," "perfume," "city," and "air" could normally not be personifications. They are known as count-words.

What we find, however, in this Shakespearean quotation is that it is just these words which are animated as if they were personifications. This kind of animation and metaphoric personification of nouns, often count-nouns, seems never to have been noticed before, probably because the function of the verb (and occasionally the adjective or adverb) in normal personification is rarely seen as animating. Once this central point of much personification is grasped, then its role may be seen as even more extensive than it normally is.

Let us look at this passage and in particular those phrases and clauses which embody these nouns. The first clause is "the poop . . . so perfumed that the winds were love-sick with them [the sails]." What we have here are personified winds made animate by the adjective "love-sick," for only humans can be love-sick. The second example is as follows, "oars . . . kept stroke, and made the water which they beat to follow faster, as amorous of their strokes." Here oars are humanized by beating water to make it follow the barge faster as if in love (amorous) of their strokes. Oars are here complicatedly personified. In the third example, the "silken tackle" becomes alive when it swells with the touch of hands. In the fourth example, "wharfs" smell perfume and become persons who possess the sense of smell. In the fifth example, the city throws out her people to witness the paragon of beauty, Cleopatra. Poor Antony is left, along with the air which might have "gone to gaze on Cleopatra too" if it were not for the fact that nature abhors a vacuum and will not allow "a gap." Here the air becomes as amorous of the glorious queen as any citizen and is our sixth example.

Thus we see running through this famous description a series of subdued or modified personifications. The metaphoric use of the verb or verb-phrase animates, in a number of cases, the noun or noun-phrase which governs the verb, even if a count-noun. This is not the normal personification process but the effect is the same, even if less obvious than usual at first sight. These figures which are close to usual

personification but which vary somewhat from the usual procedure may be called personification-metaphors. The personification of the noun is concealed unless we read carefully.

An awareness of this type of figure increases immensely the vivid and lively quality of personification. Personification and prosopopeia, which is closely linked with it, have always in traditional rhetoric been praised for their energizing of the sentence and sentences and the work in which they may be found. Unlike modern critics who find personification dull, older critics and rhetoricians found that it gave life to the work in which it appeared.⁴

The personification-metaphor, though not so called, was known to classical rhetoricians. They commonly divided the metaphor into four. Quintilian (in the Loeb translation) puts it thus: "Metaphors fall into four classes. In the first we substitute one living thing for another. . . . Secondly, inanimate things may be substituted for inanimate . . . or inanimate may be substituted for animate. . . ." Finally, Quintilian writes:

But, above all, effects of extraordinary sublimity are produced when the theme is exalted by a bold and almost hazardous metaphor and inanimate objects are given life and action, as in the phrase "'Araxes' flood that scorns a bridge'" (*Aeneid* 8.728) or in the passage of Cicero . . . where he cries, "What was that sword of yours doing, Tubero, the sword you drew on the field of Pharsalus? . . . What meant those arms you bore?" (*Pro Ligario* 3.9)⁵

Perhaps if we see these personification-metaphors as a major type of personification, then we may understand better what rhetoricians meant by praising the energy and vividness of personification. This is a common theme of eighteenth-century rhetoricians.⁶

The use of the personification-metaphor, like that of abstract personification, is more widespread than one might imagine. Keats, for instance, provides some good examples, as in the "Ode to Autumn." Here is the beginning of the poem:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
.

In fact, the whole poem is based on various forms of personification

among which the personification-metaphor takes a major role. In the quotation above, we note, besides the animate verbs "conspiring," "load," "bless," "run" (in part), "bend," and "fill," a most interesting example of the personification-metaphor in the second line where a noun phrase in apposition to the "season" addressed, "close bosom-friend," forces animation on "season" at the very beginning. Then the second person singular pronoun and the imperative ("think" in stanza three) keep up the animate force of "season." Thus, in this Ode we have personification metaphors presented in a variety of grammatical modes.⁷

Poets vary in their use of the device. Chaucer, for instance, does not seem to be especially enamored of it. There are some examples, but, on the whole, surprisingly few. His short poems seem to use this kind of personification more frequently, given their length, than his narrative poems. In "The Former Age," for instance, a line runs: "Nas the ground nat wounded with the plough" (line 9, Robinson edition). An adjectival phrase and an infinite verb perform the personification of "herte" in "The Complainte of Venus" (lines 18-20, Robinson edition). It "is of *so gret humblesse* / To me in word, in werk, in countenance, / And me to *serve* is al his besynesse."

However, Chaucer's younger contemporary Thomas Hoccleve uses this figure more frequently. In his *Complaint*, he speaks in lines 50-51 of "the substance of my memoyre / Wente to playe" and a little later (line 59) "My wit and I have ben of such accord" or "My spirites laboureden bisily" (line 148).⁸

Thomas of Hales' "A Luve-Ron" gives us another example when the author speaks of a gem which "bringeþ þe wiþute wemme (blemish) / Into þe blysse of paradis."⁹ Many other examples may be found.

What is really needed is an analysis in depth of this figure in order to see which poets use it extensively and which do not. Part of the liveliness and richness of the poetry of Keats and Shakespeare come, I am convinced, from the frequent employment of the personification-metaphor. Milton also uses the device frequently, although not so frequently as Shakespeare and Keats but more than Chaucer.¹⁰

Inasmuch as personifications usually carry their metaphoric load in the verbs, it is important that the particular figure be a noun which normally is not personifiable, so to speak. When a metaphoric animate verb is found with nouns like fortune, love, luck, truth, reason, and so forth, we are not dealing with a personification-metaphor in the sense of the word used here but with a simple personification. Furthermore, the noun must normally be a count-noun for such a figure to be identified as such. As we have noted, some nouns like "fortune," "truth,"

and so forth can be, with a slight change of meaning, both mass- or count-nouns. If they are count-nouns, they may certainly be considered to be animated in that sense. It is not common to find personification-metaphors used of such double classifiable nouns, but it is not impossible. A few examples may be seen above.

Certain animate verbs have also had a long association with certain nouns. Winds may howl, rivers run, and hearts swell. The animation is so deeply imbedded in these verb + noun combinations that we can hardly regard them as normal personification-metaphors. Their animateness has become dulled, and we do not think of these verbs as normally used only of humans.

In the case of personification-metaphors, the verb, verb phrase, or occasionally the adjective or adverb forces us to regard the inanimate noun subject (or occasionally object) as metaphorically a person. When Truth is a personification, modern usage signals it by a capital letter.¹¹ When truth is a count-noun, we can find a personification-metaphor like "truths sing their own justification."

Above all, the personification-metaphor is normally limited in its effect. Usually the animation does not extend over more than one or two sentences. A true personification is often extended over a lengthy piece of prose or poetry.

As Professor Frank pointed out in the article referred to above, an abstract personification is to be taken literally. Truth as a personification means truth. The verb may have metaphoric and allegorical overtones, but not the personified noun. With personification-metaphor, the metaphoric meaning becomes more vivid and then it fades as its brief life over part of a sentence or over a sentence or two disappears.

Thus, although closely related to personification, the personification-metaphor displays several significant differences from it and may be considered as the classical rhetoricians considered it, a variety of metaphor rather than a variety of personification. Yet its similarities to pure personification are striking. I would prefer to consider it a variety of personification. Other forms of personifying may also be ultimately distinguished. Personification is a most complex and fascinating phenomenon and analyses can still reveal more of its variety, a variety which helps to explain its universal power and long-lived popularity.

Harvard University

1. "A Grammatical Approach to Personification Allegory," *Modern Philology*, 70 (1963), 161-171. (Reprinted in M. W. Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language and Literature* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970], pp. 243-260).

2. Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations*, p. 256. In personification dialogue (when Personifications talk to each other), their speeches are normal speeches and the verbs do not carry a special metaphoric load. This provides the outstanding exception to my generalization.

3. Not as count-words. When truth, love, and so forth are pluralized, their meaning is slightly different and they appear as count-words. Mass-words are usually the only kind which can appear as personification, although not all mass-words (e.g., furniture and sugar) can normally be personified.

4. See Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations*, pp. 259-260.

5. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.9-12, ed. H. E. Butler (Loeb Library), III, pp. 304-307. For other classical examples of this quadruple classification, see Donatus, *Ars Grammatica* 3.5.6, in *Grammatici latini*, 8 vols., ed. H. Keil (Leipzig: 1857-1880), 4, 399-400. (Also Charisius, 1, 272-273; Diomedes, 1, 457; Pompeius, 5, 305-306; and Sacerdos, 6, 466-467. This division, with Biblical examples, may also be found in Bede, *De Schematibus et tropis*, ed. M. H. King, *CCSL*, 122A, 152-153.) Isidore of Seville and Julian of Toledo also make this division. I am indebted to Martin Irvine for the above references to rhetoricians other than Quintilian..

6. See Earl R. Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of Eighteenth-Century Personification," *PMLA*, 65 (1950), 435-463.

7. Other examples exist in Keats. For example, "Song," ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1900-1901), 345. We have a leaf trembling, "the night's sleepy eye closes up," and the fleeing moon. Another example comes in the "Sonnet on Hearing the Bag-Pipe . . .," where the instrument mourns (*ibid.*, p. 330). In "A Song of Opposites," nightshade kisses the woodbine (*ibid.*, p. 300). "The Eve of St. Agnes" gives us the "maiden's chamber . . . hush'd and chaste" (*ibid.*, p. 220). Other examples abound. See Appendix, Donald C. Freeman, in his "Keats's *To Autumn*: Poetry as Process and Pattern" (*Language and Style* 11 [1971], 3-17), emphasizes the sense of the activity of nature in the poem and refers to Keats's "personified vision" (p. 11), but interprets it all in a different, though valuable, context from mine.

8. Taken from the selection from the "Complaint" chosen by John Burrow in *English Verse 1300-1500*, Longman Annotated Anthologies of English Verse (London and New York: Longman, 1977), pp. 265ff.

9. Quoted from *Early Middle English Texts*, ed. Bruce Dickins and R. M. Wilson (New York: Norton, 1951), p. 106 (lines 165-166).

10. For some examples see *Paradise Lost* 2. 550-551, 581, 660, 1011, etc.

11. Until the nineteenth century, many nouns were routinely capitalized. Hence, the capital letter is not of much use as an indication of personification before the early nineteenth century. As indicated in this paragraph, the object rather than the subject may occasionally create a personification-metaphor as in the following lines from William Cory's (1823-1892) well-known translation from the Greek, "Heraclitus."

I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

(#653 in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1950*, ed. Helen Gardner [Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972], 705; italics added)

APPENDIX

Some further examples of personification-metaphors in Keats:

There saw the swan his neck of arched snow,
And oar'd himself along with majesty;

(From "Imitation of Spenser", in
The Poetical Works of John Keats,
ed. H. Buxton Forman, C. B. [London:
Oxford Univ. Press, 1934],
p. 22, ll. 14-15)

It seem'd an emerald in the silver sheen
Of the bright waters; or as when on high,
Through clouds of fleecy white, laughs the coerulean sky.

(*Ibid.*, ll. 25-27)

And all around it dipp'd luxuriously
Slopings of verdure through the glassy tide,
Which, as it were in gentle amity,
Rippled delighted up the flowery side;
As if to glean the ruddy tears, it tried,
Which fell profusely from the rose-tree stem!
Haply it was the workings of its pride,
In strife to throw upon the shore a gem
Outvieing all the buds in Flora's diadem.

(*Ibid.*, ll. 28-36)

The sun, when first he kist away the tears
That fill'd the eyes of morn; . . .

("To my Brother George" [the short poem],
p. 34, ll. 2-3)

That the still murmur of the honey bee
Would never teach a rural song to me:
That the bright glance from beauty's eyelids slanting
Would never make a lay of mine enchanting,

("To my Brother George" [the long poem],
pp. 26-30, ll. 13-16)

All that's reveal'd from that far seat of blisses,
Is, the clear fountains' interchanging kisses,
As gracefully descending, light and thin,
Like silver streaks across a dolphin's fin,

(*Ibid.*, ll. 47-50)

Or the coy moon, when in the waviness
Of whitest clouds she does her beauty dress,

And staidly paces higher up, and higher,
Like a sweet nun in holy-day attire?

(*Ibid.*, 11.59-62)

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;

("On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,"
p. 39, 11.9-10)

Small, busy flames play through the fresh laid coals,
And their faint cracklings o'er our silence creep
Like whispers of the household gods that keep
A gentle empire o'er fraternal souls.

("To my Brothers,"
p. 37, 11.1-4)

The air was cooling, and so very still,
That the sweet buds which with a modest pride
Pull droopingly, in slanting curve aside,
Their scanty leaved, and finely tapering stems,
Had not yet lost those starry diadems
Caught from the early sobbing of the morn.

("I Stood Tip-toe,"
p. 3, 11.2-7)

The clouds were pure and white as flocks new shorn,
And fresh from the clear brook; sweetly they slept
On the blue fields of heaven, and then there crept
A little noiseless noise among the leaves,
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves:

(*Ibid.*, p. 3, 11.8-12)

Here are sweet peas, on tip-toe for a flight:
With wings of gentle flush o'er delicate white
And taper fingers catching at all things,
To bind them all about with tiny rings.

(*Ibid.*, p. 3, 11.57-60)

. . . and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; . . .

("Endymion," Book I, p. 57, 11.16-18)

Soon, as it seem'd, we left our journeying high,
And straightway into frightful eddies swoop'd;
Such as ay muster where grey time has scoop'd
Huge dens and caverns in a mountain's side:

(*Ibid.*, p. 74, 11.647-50)

. . . Fold

A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,
And soothe thy lips: hist, when the airy stress
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
Eolian magic from their lucid wombs:
Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;
Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;
Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave
Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;
Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,
Where long ago a giant battle was;

(*Ibid.*, p. 77, 11.781-92)

. . . Still his feet

Went swift beneath the merry-winged guide,
Until it reached a splashing fountain's side
That, near a cavern's mouth, for ever pour'd
Unto the temperate air: then high it soar'd,
And, downward, suddenly began to dip,
As if, athirst with so much toil, 'twould sip
The crystal spout-head: so it did, with touch
Most delicate, as though afraid to smutch
Even with mealy gold the waters clear.

("Endymion," Book II, p. 85,
11.82-91)

For as the sunset peeps into a wood
So saw he panting light, and towards it went
Through winding alleys; and lo, wonderment!

(*Ibid.*, p. 94, 11.382-84)

. . . Above his head,
Four lily stalks did their white honours wed
To make a coronal . . .

(*Ibid.*, p. 94, 11.406-08)

. . . so the waters drew
Their doming curtains, high, magnificent,
Aw'd from the throne aloof . . .

("Endymion," Book III, p. 135,
11.869-71)

. . . "King of the stormy seal
Brother of Jove, and co-inheritor
Of elements! Eternally before
Thee the waves awful bow. Fast, stubborn rock,
At thy fear'd trident shrinking, doth unlock

Its deep foundations, hissing into foam.
All mountain-rivers lost in the wide home
Of thy capacious bosom ever flow.
Thou frownest, and old Eolus thy foe
Skulks to his cavern, 'mid the gruff complaint
Of all his rebel tempests. Dark clouds faint
When, from thy diadem, a silver gleam
Slants over blue dominion. . . ."

(*Ibid.*, p. 137, 11.943-55)